Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2021

Old St. Pat’s

With all of the references to the natural world

 That so frequently punctuate the readings,

 Especially the gospels,

 I often wonder if it would have been more beneficial

 To have studied the natural sciences

 Or biology

 Or animal husbandry

 Or agriculture, rather than

 all of the philosophy courses I was mandated to take.

 Jesus is continuously talking about the natural world around him

 About foxes and sparrows

 Mustard trees and lilies

 Fig trees and yeast.

 And when he is not sermonizing on these natural phenomenon

 He is knee deep in loaves and fishes

 Sheep and pigs

Grainfields and seashores.

Today’s gospel reminds me how little I know

 About horticulture, viniculture and oenology

 Oh, don’t get me wrong,

 I do know how to operate a corkscrew

 can distinguish a Malbec from a Shiraz

 And even am somewhat skilled at decanting a good wine.

But consumption is decidedly not the key to this familiar gospel image

 Of vine and branches,

 Or especially about the process of pruning for bearing fruit

 So central to this celebrated pericope.

Thus, the past week I’ve been reading a lot about pruning

 And why it is essential for all sorts of plants

 But especially for grape vines

 Surprising to me, some of the folk leading the way here

 Are not vintners

 Nor agriculturalists

 But scientists who specialize in molecular genetics

 And computer modeling[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Recently, for example, two collaborating scientists

 Explained that each shoot tips on a plant

 Can influence the growth of all others

 Active shoot tips release a specific hormone into the main stem

 But if there is too much of that hormone already in the stem

 They weaker shoots can’t get into the game

 The system is clogged;

it’s like a crowded main road

 blocking other vehicles from entering

From side streets and on-ramps

So those shoot tips get crowded out, and whither.

 Shoot tips actually compete with each other

 With the strongest branches growing the most vigorously;

 But thoughtful pruning levels the playing field

 Slows the traffic of the stronger branches

 And lets all of the inhibited shoot tips back into the game.

This is an exceedingly important process for grape vines.

 Unpruned vines grow in wild, unruly ways

 They explode with new branches and cascades of leaves

 That leave few resources needed for the fruit to grow

 Parallel to this pruning process with grape vines

 Is the need to train the vines

 This means shaping them to grow along

 Along vertical posts or wires

 And then out onto horizontal wires or trellises

 So they have more access to sunlight

 But also are easier to prune

 So to produce more fruit

Until my little excursion into pruning this past week

 I think I overlooked an important aspect of today’s gospel.

 When I have listened to this passage before,

 I presumed it was about me being connected to Jesus:

 He was the vine, I was a branch

 And my spiritual task was to stay connected to him.

 Pruning, of course, was part of the spiritual discipline

 To prune myself of attitudes and practices

 Of afflictions and addictions

 That would prevent me from staying securely grafted

 Onto the vine of Christ.

 What was missing from that vision, however,

 Was that the pruning and the grafting

 The discipline and the commitment

 The sacrifice and the growing

 Are not only for my personal spiritual benefit

 But for the sake of the vineyard

 For the sake of the trellis of disciples

 For the sake of the harvest of justice and reconciliation

 That is the authentic fruit of being planted in Christ.

That insight pushed me back into the gospels

 to ponder all of those stories

 In which Christ was pruning his disciples for mission.

 Remember the sons of Zebedee

 Whose mother tries to secure high positions for them

 In Jesus’ kingdom (Matt 20:20)

 And in reply Jesus offers a pruning test

 Inquiring whether they can drink of the cup of suffering

 The cup he struggles with in Gethsemane

 Before himself being splayed on the sacred trellis of the cross.

 Jesus follows up this pruning test with an instruction

 About not lording it over each other

 But about becoming servants to one another.

 Peter gets publicly pruned a number of times

 Pointedly when Jesus calls him “Satan”

 After the prince of apostles rebukes Jesus

 For predicting his own death (Matt 16:23)

 And then, more gently

 At the very end of John’s Gospel

 When Jesus recalls Peter’s triple denial

 By thrice asking him “do you love me”

 And reinforcing Peter’s mission to feed othes.

 A more cynical approach could suggest

 That in such instances

 Peter got his wings clipped

 But bird with clipped wings can no longer fly

 And Peter with the other disciples needed to soar

 In proclaiming the good news after the death of the lord.

 So I prefer to imagine Peter getting pruned

 Pared down

 Cut back

 Snipped and shaped and trimmed

 So that the gospel, and not just Peter, would bare much fruit

 I imagine that is also what happened to St. Paul

who got knocked off his high horse

but not decimated in his encounter with the Risen One

 The Lord needed Paul for the sake of so many communities

 The Corinthians, the Ephesians, the Galatians

 So the Holy Spirit did some serious pruning

 So that Christianity itself could be birth and bear fruit.

You and I have probably had parallel experiences

 Of being cut back, sheared, diminished, and abridged.

 Some of those moments, even from decades ago, stay with us:

 The rebuke from a teacher or coach

 not getting the scholarship or making the team

 There are scores of these stories on the internet

 That continue to simmer in so many souls

 Sometimes the pruning is destructive, even abusive

I remember a section from Dr. Damon Tweedy’s

*Black man in a White Coat[[2]](#endnote-2)*

 The reflections of an African American Doctor

 And his journey through medical school, residency, and practice

 From a working-class family with only a public education

 Tweedy was accepted

into the prestigious medical school at Duke University

 He tells the story of being in a large lecture class

 And during a break in the lecture

 While students were milling about ...

 The professor, who seldom if ever spoke to students,

 Made a b-line for Tweedy and asked

 “are you here to fix the lights?”

 When Tweedy didn’t understand the inquiry

 The professor pointed to one section of the lecture hall

 Where the lights were noticeably low

And so he asked again, so you going to fix the lights

 When Tweedy said “no”

 The Professor then asked

“then what are you doing in my class”

 “I’m a student in your class,” Tweedy responded

 This prompted the irritated professor to turn without a word

 And return to the front of the room

 slamming the door on the dignity of a promising student

 Judged worthy of only being part of a maintenance staff

 Because of the color of his skin.

 That, in my estimation, was not pruning but professorial abuse

 And the litmus test for distinguish between the two

 Comes to us from today’s second reading, that is,

 Whether the pruning is motivated by love.

While scars from past diminishments inflicted by others abound

 Maybe part of the hidden spirituality of today’s gospel

 Touches our own self-diminishment.

 Some of us are growing older

 Some of us are becoming sicker

 Some of us are moving past our intellectual

 Or physical prime

 As our employability abates

 Our abilities to play the game with the same vigor recedes

 And our leadership skills start to atrophy .

We become aware that nature itself is pruning us

And we have little apparent control over such declines.

 On the other hand, we do have control

 Over how we respond to this natural ebbing of mind & body

 Over whether or not we allow ourselves to be pared back

 In a spirit of generosity, so that our families

 Our friends, our community can bear new fruit,

 Or whether we hold on tightly

 Forcing others to compete for the energy

 The light

 The love we crave to absorb.

I have two great friends, long married

 Who pondered diminishment as they wrote about

 The spirituality of marriage.

 In a veiled autobiographical way

 They chart the stages of marriage over many decades.

 The last stage is what they call “devotion”

 They write:

In time, the shape of aging love earns the name of devotion. Devotion is the enfleshed affection that survives illness and aging and enjoys growing old together. The ancient author Plutarch (d. 120 AD) wrote: “the love for a virtuous woman suffers no autumn but flourishes even with grey hair” …[[3]](#endnote-3) By this point child-rearing is long gone, active careers are over, the couple’s love becomes an affection nuanced by the awareness of final days, of threatening illness. Such devotion might be called *eros* with wrinkles.

Nature prunes us all, at one stage or another

 The example of Jesus, radically pruned on Golgotha

 Invites us into the unlikely spiritual practice of diminishment:

 The devotion of stepping aside so that others might flourish

 trimmed back so that others might have more sunlight

 Receding to the margins so that others

 Might more easily claim the center

And so, with the poet we muse

There are moments when the veil seems
almost to lift, and we understand what
the earth is meant to mean to us — the
trees in their docility, the hills in
their patience, the flowers and the
vines in their wild, sweet vitality.
Then the Word is within us, and the
Book is put away.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Today we pray that the veil might lift a bit

And Jesus Word might truly be in us

 Eternally connecting us to the vine

 In all of it sweet vitality,

 Whose gospel prunes us only for generosity

 helping others bear fruit in a rich kingdom harvest

 Through Christ our Lord.

1. https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/a-23-2009-10-12-voa2-83142337/130043.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Damon Tweedy, *Black Man in a White Coat* (New York: Picador, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James and Evelyn Whitehead, “­­**Promises to Keep: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage,” in** *Catholic Marriage: A Pastoral-Liturgical Handbook,* ed. Edward Foley (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2019), p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mary Oliver, “The Veil,” https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214662 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)